

## **“The ASpYRe Message”: An Overview and Summary**

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The Active Sports and Youth Recreation Commission (“ASpYRe”) represents over **500 collective years** of experience using, developing, enhancing, partnering with, and advocating for the region’s parks, sports, and recreation system. It is this experience that was the driving force for an amazing series of informative discussions about the regional system’s past, present, and future, as well as its overall preservation, enhancement, and growth. As the Commission weighed dozens of recommendations, ideas, and possibilities, major themes began to rise to the surface that guided much of the Commission’s philosophy. These “messages” seemed to consistently weave into each policy issue that the Commission addressed; thus, in addition to the comprehensive list of 200+ specific recommendations, the Commission offers the following statements, collectively entitled, “The ASpYRe Message”.

### **1.1 A Regional Vision and a Regional Parks, Sports, and Recreation Renaissance**

*The Commission’s message, its report, and its philosophy are all offered as a foundation for a new omni-jurisdictional regional vision...*

Our region has a complex collection of different parks, sports, and recreation systems. The systems are supported by various government jurisdictions, non-profit organizations, and other contributors and address various regional, local, and community-based needs. Each one has its own purpose, stakeholders, and vision. Many of the systems have similar challenges (operations and maintenance costs, supply and demand challenges, land availability, etc), yet they all are unique in their scope, approach, and creativity. The Commission believes that a new regional vision should not only be a platform for preserving, enhancing, and creating needed regional parks, sports, and recreation assets, but also a comprehensive regional philosophy where the ideas, successes, challenges, and visions of all jurisdictions, park users, sports groups, community partners, and our 1.7 million citizens, in general, are key components of a regional parks, sports, and recreation renaissance.

*It is time for the region to empower a regional parks, sports, and recreation renaissance and recapture the sparkle and civic pride that drove Forward Thrust...*

After creating a regional vision and a dramatic identity in the late 1960’s, King County leveraged a massive investment in its regional parks, sports, and recreation system that envied throughout the country. The assets we have from Forward Thrust investment are still very valuable today and we have managed over the years to expand the acreage of the park system and add a few marquee facilities to create a County park system with 180 parks stretching over 26,000 acres with 200 miles of trails, 157 ballfields, 16 pools, and many other components. The Commissioners watched slide shows and have personally observed throughout the nation, however, regions that have surpassed ours with incredible regional parks, sports, and recreation facilities that fully integrate entrepreneurial themes, economic development strategies, creative inter-jurisdictional partnerships, and progressive on-site revenue structures. Many of these regions have developed lucrative voter relationships that are based in regional civic trust and pride, not just basic need. The time has arrived for a new movement in this region. King County must recapture the sparkle of the Forward Thrust era or risk falling further behind in this forward migration or, even worse, risk the basic short term and long term health of the assets we do have.

***The voters would support a regional parks, sports, and recreation renaissance if it has a regional vision, regional identity, and a regional “wow factor” that is compatible and complimentary to the existing jurisdictions and community partners, while embracing progressive ways of doing business...***

King County is unable to empower a parks, sports, and recreation renaissance because it has not assumed a leadership role with an omni-jurisdictional regional vision for a truly regional parks, sports, and recreation system. It has not established substantive partnerships with the dozens of local jurisdictions and hundreds of other providers and stakeholders within the region's parks, sports, and recreation system. The public supports parks, sports, and recreation, but that support must be earned. Quite simply, the regional parks, sports, and recreation system is severely disconnected from its voters. A long history of an overall lack of user awareness, inter-jurisdictional disagreements, and no universal regional identity since Forward Thrust, has contributed to a voter ambiguity about the direction and purpose of the regional parks, sports, and recreation system and its connection to their local parks, sports, and recreation system. The region will not be able to evolve by simply maintaining the status quo, expressing desperation, or by direct or indirect interjurisdictional pressure and/or voter motivation through closures. Only after a new omni-jurisdictional regional vision is championed should the region pursue new voter-approved funding structures or other significant financing strategies.

***Protecting the regional parks, sports, and recreation system is a matter of public health...***

The scientific literature indicates that exercise in any form is the number one factor for increased longevity and improved health status. A plethora of peer reviewed articles have validated the theory that any form of exercise contributes to improved mental and physical health which is directly associated with decreased health care costs, and measurably improved quality of life. The current population trends indicate that over one fourth of the US population is overweight and therefore subject to long-term health consequences. In the State of Washington alone, the obesity rate has doubled in the last decade. Although there are several contributing factors to weight gain, the majority of weight loss programs include some form of physical activity. Other research has indicated that only one third of our children participate in mainstream sports such as soccer and baseball, so assorted facilities must be availed to the public to motivate them towards improved health through recreation. While the longstanding focus on open space and passive parks acquisition due to the risk of missed opportunities has merit, the region should also have a philosophy that recognizes and addresses the ongoing missed opportunities for public health through active recreation.

## **1.2 The Current Crisis**

***It is a mixed-use parks, sports, and recreation crisis, NOT a resource or preservation lands crisis...***

This region has enjoyed incredible successes in the public acquisition of preservation and resource lands. With dozens of public revenue sources, revenue, hundreds of large local, regional, and national grant programs, and multiple regional, state, and federal jurisdictions, non-profits all committed to the cause, we have had an uninterrupted acquisition strategy resulting in an impressive inventory of preservation and resource lands and open space. There has been a desperate battle, however, year in and year out, to barely fund the current service levels of the regional parks, sports, and recreation system. It is the playgrounds, sportsfields, pools, trails, beaches, picnic areas, dog parks, summer camps, youth swim lessons, and hundreds of other forms of recreation that are at immediate risk with many of them already being closed seasonally, some of them closing completely, and all them at risk for near-term mothballing. Preservation and resource lands are an important component of our quality of life, as is active sports and recreation, and both should be protected. The current crisis, however, primarily involves the basic preservation, enhancement, and growth of the mixed-use parks, sports, and recreation system and ultimately, the physical and social health of our children, our seniors, and the public at large. Resource and preservation lands, while crucially important and clearly a regional responsibility, should not be placed under the current funding crisis umbrella. Making this distinction is vital if we are to resolve the system's fundamental problems.

***It is a regional parks, sports, and recreation identity, role, and vision crisis NOT just a funding crisis...***

The current focus on “bite-size” funding and financing fixes to address the 100 year old CX revenue puzzle and its impact on parks, sports, and recreation funding does not address the lack of a regional parks, sports, and recreation identity, role, and vision that resonates with the public. The framers of Forward Thrust set out to develop such a vision and were rewarded handsomely by the voters. The region has not championed that kind of vision since. The current crisis is less about the diminishing availability of CX funds, and more about the lack of a regional identity, entrepreneurial components, system efficiency, creativity, and ultimately, the absence of a clear omni-jurisdictional vision over the years that could have otherwise leveraged the support of voters into successful bonds, levies, or other voter-approved revenue structures.

### **1.3 Regional Leadership Role**

***The County’s parks, sports, and recreation role should be as a regional leader that partners with, empowers, and invests in regional facilities with local jurisdictions, sports and recreation groups, and community organizations...***

There are 39 cities, 19 school districts, and other governments, as well as, hundreds of non-profits, sports organizations, and community groups all developing, operating, and managing thousands of parks, sports, and recreation facilities throughout the region. The regional disconnection between all of these valuable individual, localized efforts is a very serious problem. As King County continues to focus solely on its own system and not on an omni-jurisdictional leadership role and new partnerships, we are losing precious opportunities to initiate a parks, sports, and recreation renaissance. All the stakeholders in the system have the power, the resources, and the creativity to shepherd many of the regional components of a forward migration, but cannot be successful without a regional plan, regional philosophy, and a regional investment that is also compatible with their local visions and philosophies. The opportunity costs of not having this regional vision are so great that the County must begin taking steps immediately to improve its connection with existing jurisdictions and community partners so this regional role can emerge.

***The County must recognize and embrace the dozens of existing jurisdictions as equal partners in the quest to create a regional identity...***

As annexation continues to expand, the County’s role in virtually every function of government has been challenged philosophically and/or directly affected by revenue reductions due to the antiquated regional tax structure. Historically, the reaction to this change has been somewhat negative; fraught with inter-jurisdictional disagreements that often led to unproductive relationships between jurisdictions. Meanwhile, the public continues to want parks, sports, and recreation opportunities and often does not know and/or care who owns, operates, or maintains them. The County should recognize this trend and work towards a healthier platform where local jurisdictions are equal and willing partners in marquee components of a new regional parks, sports, and recreation system. The County should work with cities, for example, to identify future components of their local vision and plans that have regional implications and embrace joint projects that bring local and regional investments together.

## 1.4 Community Empowerment

***The community experience and ultimately the voter connection with the regional parks, sports, and recreation system must improve...***

Traditionally, the public's experience with parks, sports and recreation systems is based on a model where the government owns, operates, and maintains the system and "allows" the public to use it. This region must evolve to a model that embraces a sense of community ownership, citizen empowerment, and additional user investments that actively engages the user groups, sports organizations, and the public as equal partners in the system's success. The Commission believes that the traditional barriers facing this evolution, including labor agreements, risk management, exclusivity concerns, and the overall jurisdictional discomfort with relinquishing control are not insurmountable. The government's role should be to lead, coordinate, and empower this forward migration and only where it is appropriate, needed, and adequately funded, should it be the primary owner, operator, and caretaker of any given asset.

***Most new active sports and recreation facilities can be created through ADOPs...***

The Commission believes that Association Development and Operations Partnerships (ADOPs) are, by far, the most underutilized tool for creating **new** parks, sports, and recreation facilities. Sammamish Rowing Program, 60 Acres Soccer Complex, Marymoor Dogpark, and Northshore Little League Complex, are a few examples that we have in this region. Basically an ADOP is a public/private partnership where a significant portion of the development, operations, and maintenance of a public facility is carried out by a community-based organization directly connected to the primary use of the facility. The jurisdictional contribution usually comes in the form of land, facilities, grants, or other resources. For a site or facility to be ADOP-compatible, it usually needs to have a primary use, have a well-organized community partner bound to that primary use, and be public and/or have use patterns and programming that are similar to what the jurisdiction would otherwise offer at the site. Properly selected and carefully designed, ADOPs can address most of the potential drawbacks of public/private partnerships including exclusivity, poor stewardship, risk management, labor agreements, and other barriers. The region must recognize that new facilities can be created through ADOPs even as existing operations and maintenance funds continue to evaporate and that these partnerships are usually permanently immune to jurisdictional funding cycles. The Commission believes the Youth Sports Facilities Grant Program is a nearly flawless tool for empowering ADOPs and it should not only be preserved, but also expanded.

***The County must go beyond simply creating public/private partnerships, it must proactively empower the community groups, sports organizations, system stakeholders, and the public to become equal partners...***

ADOPs and other public/private partnerships are the new buzz in virtually all governmental funding and financing challenges. There is a difference; however, between simply partnering with compatible organizations and proactively developing and empowering partners themselves. We must view community partners as investments and provide the proper tools, knowledge, technical expertise, and any other resources required for them to be successful, equal, and long-term partners. In return, the system will receive boundless sweat equity, direct vested interest, and an unmatched passion for any given site or facility. This will create strong foundations for a long term assets that are usually immune from potential collapses of jurisdictional funding and financing infrastructures or other negative forces inherent in parks, sports, and recreation systems. The region simply cannot make a better investment.

## 1.5 Aquatics

***The aquatics system is regional, needs regional leadership, and needs a regional investment.***

King County's aquatics system is almost 40 years old. It consists of an aging collection of facilities strapped with expensive operations and maintenance costs and an overall shortage of water surface and water time that has not met the aquatic sports and recreation needs in this region for over a decade. Despite being predominantly located in incorporated areas, the aquatics system is clearly a regional function due to its overall costs, scope, user base, and public health significance to a region completely surrounded by waterways. Preserving the resilient Forward Thrust pool assets while also developing the new aquatics facilities that are needed, provides excellent opportunities for regional leadership through inter-jurisdictional partnerships, community empowerment, investments in efficiency technology, entrepreneurial creativity, and many of the other themes that embody this report. With these components implemented in a clear regional aquatics vision, it is the Commission's belief that the voters will provide the necessary support needed to preserve, enhance, and expand the region's aquatic system to meet the needs of today and the next decade. Most local jurisdictions will not be able to simply pick up the regional aquatic assets and attempts to localize the pools runs the risk of creating a disparate service delivery model where only the wealthiest cities will have aquatics programs.

## 1.6 The "True" Parks, Sports, and Recreation System

***The region must recognize and fully embrace the entire community parks, sports, and recreation system, not just its immediate assets.***

As the Commission began to determine the scope of its coverage, it became quickly apparent that a comprehensive approach was the only way a truly accurate picture of the region's parks, sports, and recreation system scope could be developed. This comprehensive approach led to the profiling of over 100 sports and recreation opportunities that use parks, fields, pools, lakes, gyms, courts, outdoors, sky, streets, trails, snow, ice, and dozens of other venues and assets. Just the simple awareness of these diverse opportunities' dramatically shifted the focus from a jurisdictional issue to a non-jurisdictional issue of impressive regional significance. From lawn bowling to mountainboarding, rugby to hang gliding, water polo to competitive badminton, BMX sports to kitesurfing, inline hockey to model airplanes, skateboarding to curling, basketball to kayaking and every thing in between this region is alive with recreation that goes way beyond any given jurisdiction. It clearly illustrates how crucial regional leadership is needed to preserve, enhance, and grow these opportunities in partnership with the local jurisdictions and the 4,000+ community partners that make these opportunities a reality for hundreds of thousands of citizens.

## 1.7 The Regional Priority

***Despite being a high voter priority, the County's CX contribution to parks, sports, and recreation represents only a little more than ½ percent of the County's total \$2.9 billion budget...***

Recognizing all of the funding source restrictions, "mandated" services pressure, annexations, economic downturns, personnel and inflation cost increases, and other County budgetary challenges, the Commission still believes there is a basic disparity between voter perceptions and expectations for parks, sports, and recreation, and its actual priority as a ratio of the County's overall budget. Over the last century, the County has maintained a distinct regional role in public transportation, criminal justice, natural resources and many other regional functions and has created the necessary funding structures to match. It is time to create a similar identity and funding structure for the regional parks, sports, and recreation system.

